

The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE WAY HOME FROM BETHLEHEM

December 27, 1992

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

"O sing to the Lord a new song. . ."
-Psalm 98:1 (NRSV)

At the church staff meeting after the performances of "Amahl," someone started a lively conversation by asking which scene in the operetta was our favorite. "Amahl and the Night Visitors" is an operetta written and composed for television by Gian Carlo Manotti. It was wonderfully staged and performed here two weeks ago.

The drama takes place at the time of Jesus' birth. Amahl is a young boy who lives with his widowed mother. They are very poor: their last livestock has died and the only way they can survive is by begging door to door. Amahl is a dreamer, known to exaggerate the truth a bit on occasion. He is also crippled and leans heavily on the rough crutch he has made for himself in order to walk.

One night while he is outside dreaming he sees a wonderful new star in the dark sky. His mother won't believe him. But then, the three Kings, following the star, stop at their modest dwelling for the night. Late at night, when they are all asleep, Amahl's mother attempts to steal the gold intended for the Christ child to help care for Amahl. She is caught. A struggle ensues. The King whose gold she has taken realizes her plight, gives her the gold, tells her about the baby to whom he intended to give it. She is enchanted by the very idea of the Christ child, gives the gold back so it can be presented at the manger. And Amahl, listening to all this, decides to give the only thing he owns, his crutch, in case the child should need one some time.

When he gives his crutch, Amahl is miraculously healed, dances and runs and then accompanies the Kings as they resume their journey to Bethlehem.

Well, the conversation about our favorite scene included the wonderful moment when the three Kings – actually Wesley, David and Ned regally decked out – appear in the doorway, utterly surprising Amahl's skeptical mother, and sing with deep resonant harmonics, "Good Evening." But the consensus favorite – because we are all, finally, unapologetic sentimentalists, and my favorite – is that magic moment when Amahl tentatively, slowly presents his crutch to one of the Kings to take to the Christ child, and as the violin tremolo enhances the suspense, he puts his weight on his poor crippled leg and stands alone and takes a step and says, "I can walk."

That not only tugs at the heart, it points in the direction of a powerful and familiar Biblical motif. A person crippled, limited, dependent, offers the object upon which he is most heavily dependent to God, and finds suddenly that he is whole, free, with infinite new possibilities ahead of him. A person who is oppressed and confined, offers the symbol of his oppression to God and in that act of singular courage discovers that he is free to enjoy a whole new future and the first thing he does is sever the ties with his past and launch into a new adventure. When, at the end he and his mother sing their touching farewell and Amahl walks, under his own power, to Bethlehem you know that nothing is going to be the same for either of them again. You are also seeing a picture of what faith is.

That's actually good incarnational theology and it is, it has always seemed to me, the one thing we ought to say and think about on the first Sunday in Christmastide.

It is the day to submit the whole Christmas phenomenon – the pageantry, the festivity, the ritual, submit all of it - to the blunt two-word test of all religion: "So What?" It is the day to decide where we go from here: how we get back home from Bethlehem and what we do when we get there.

The story points in that direction. The Magi, you recall, must return to their homes by a different route because of Herod's plot to harm the child. And the shepherds? Luke says they returned to their flocks, their daily work, which was not very exciting, certainly not very promising in terms of its potential; returned "glorifying and praising God." And while it doesn't say so, my assumption is that those were very different shepherds after that night at Bethlehem.

It's a thought wonderfully conveyed in W. H. Auden's *Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being*, one of the great Christmas poems. The shepherd says:

"Tonight for the first time the prison gates have opened
Music and sudden light
Have interrupted our routine tonight
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts
O here and now the endless journey starts."

The Biblical sequence of faith is this:

1. encounter with God.
2. decision with God.
3. journey with God.

The encounter with God, which is sometimes clear and dramatic, but more often subtle and nuanced. . . . the decision to be different, to be faithful. . . .

The courageous step in the direction of a new future. Think of how many times it happened! Abraham and Sarah picking up stakes and moving toward the Promised Land. Moses leaving his flocks and comfortable life to go to Egypt and free the slaves.

The nation itself – leaving the secure predictability of bondage in Egypt to wander through the wilderness for forty years.

Jesus – leaving the carpentry shop to give his life to his sense of what God wanted.

Peter, James, John leaving their nets to follow.

Faith means walking into the future – often by a different route: trusting in the God who has promised to be an active participant.

It is one of the very major themes of Christian faith. . . . God's promise of newness.

"O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things,"

the Psalmist wrote.

The heart of our faith and the essence of the Christmas gospel is God's promise of newness.

Let's think about that in the broadest possible concept. God, we believe, is still creating the world and us and so newness happens all the time in creation. Professor James Fowler tells about visiting the Pacific Northwest and seeing Mt. Saint Helens for the first time. He saw the crater and truncated peak, the shattered matchsticks littering its lava mud slopes, and heard the government geologist call it an "adolescent volcano." He writes: "It struck me, as never before, that we live on a living planet. Creation, even on this globe, is not completed." [*Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, p. 86]

The cover article in *Time* last week was on the intriguing new convergences of astrophysics, philosophy and theology. Astronomers, for instance, know about zones in the universe where under "astonishing temperatures and pressures, stars and planets are being formed and spun into space; the 'maternity ward of the universe' astronomers call it." [Fowler, *ob. cit.*]

And the promise is fulfilled on the most personal level. Professor Fowler illustrates:

"New creation, at the microcosmic level, came to visit us this Christmas when, on one of the coldest Christmas Eves in recorded history, we improvised a shelter for the three sheep and one donkey who made up the bestiary for the nativity scene at our local church. On Christmas morning, where there had been three sheep, now there were four. One of the ewes gave birth to a lamb. God the creator. This is God's ongoing work of creation." [*op. cit.*, p. 86]

The philosophers used to talk about the universe and its creation in terms of a watchmaker who fashions a complicated clock, winds it up and then lets it run down. But science, of all things, is telling us that the clock isn't completed yet. The process of creation continues.

So what? The personal faith implications are powerful. God's promise of newness means there is always potential, always hope for you and me. It means that God is not the philosophic ground of the status quo, but the power and energy agitating for the new, the hopeful, the future. It means that change is to be embraced by faithful men and women, not feared.

"Sing to the Lord a new song," because the Lord is always up to new things. This child, this birth, this stunning new thing, is the sign of God's promise.

The danger in an American Christmas, William Sloan Coffin argued in an editorial last week, is not what we thought it was. It is not commercialism. Commercialism never pretends to be anything other than it is. The danger is sentimentalism, the getting mushy and teary about a little baby and sweet smelling hay and the gentle mother's lullaby, without even for a moment allowing the power of it, the newness of it to enter your life and start creating something new, start rearranging the furniture.

This child was born: this love was given to start a new creation, and when it is received in the human heart, something new happens: new life, new possibility, new freedom, new hope.

Amahl walks into a new future – a little boy who can walk, a boy who can now become the adult God wants him to be. But he has to do more than feel sentimental about the baby. He has to give his crutch and trust his leg, and take a step.

So God calls you, me, having been to Bethlehem, to give up whatever limits us or oppresses us, and to become part of God's new creation.

Perhaps for you it is God's call to love someone you have had difficulty loving.

Or, perhaps, having been to see the child, your new direction is to forgive someone who has offended you and whose offense you have been keeping in your heart where it fuels your anger and gnaws away at your soul.

Or perhaps God now summons you to leave a particular dependency – always a difficult decision – an addiction, a relationship, and to walk alone, autonomous, free, whole.

And I have a sense that for all of us, having been to Bethlehem, the way home means risking a journey, redirecting our lives, giving everything away, returning to our flocks "praising and glorifying God."

We have celebrated the birth. In many different ways we have traveled to Bethlehem. And for the most part, have enjoyed ourselves. And now it is time to return, with the power of God's love in us, prepared, eager to become part of God's new creation, God's Kingdom of peace and justice and compassion and a love that will be overcome by nothing in the year ahead.

Ann Weems is an author and writer of light verse. One of the things she has written is about a seasonal duty we will all perform in the next week or so. I heard it for the first time this year and I'd like to read it to you. It's called "Boxed."

"I must admit to a certain guilt
about stuffing the Holy Family into a box
in the aftermath of Christmas.
It's frankly a time of personal triumph when,
each Advent's eve, I free them (and the others)
from a year's imprisonment
boxed in the dark of our basement.
Out they come, one by one,
struggling through the straw,
last year's tinsel still clinging to their robes.
Nevertheless, they appear,
ready to take their place again
in the light of another Christmas.
The Child is first
because he's the one I'm most reluctant to box.
Attached forever to his cradle, he emerges,
apparently unscathed from the time spent upside down
to avoid the crush of the lid.
His mother, dressed eternally in blue,
still gazes adoringly,
in spite of the fact that
her features are somewhat smudged.
Joseph has stood for eleven months,
holding valiantly what's left of his staff,
broken twenty Christmases ago
by a child who hugged a little too tightly.
The Wise Ones still travel,
though not quite so elegantly,
the standing camel having lost its back leg
and the sitting camel having lost one ear.
However, gifts intact, they are ready to move.
The shepherds, walking or kneeling,
sometimes confused with Joseph
(who wears the same dull brown),
tumble forth, followed by three sheep
in very bad repair.
There they are again,
not a grand set surely,
but one the children (and now the grandchildren)
can touch and move about to reenact that silent night,
When the others return,
we will wind the music box on the back of the stable
and light the Advent candles
and go once more to Bethlehem.
And this year, when it's time to pack the figures away,
we'll be more careful that the Peace and Goodwill
are not also boxed for another year!"

"O Sing to the Lord a New Song"

Amen.